

# **Journey Through the Underworld: Fabric and Fata**

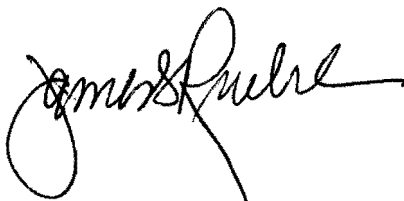
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Alison Mulert

Thesis Advisor

Dr. James Ruebel

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James Ruebel", with a large, stylized loop at the end.

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

May 2009

May 9, 2009

## Abstract

I created a visual representation of Aeneas's journey through the Underworld through the medium of quilting. The interpretation of the journey is abstract and is conveyed through 35 quilt blocks representing the stages of Aeneas's progress. The beginning of the quilt is located in the top left corner with the rest of the stages represented by diagonal lines ending in the bottom right corner. The composition of the squares is based on the text of Vergil's *Aeneid*, Book VI. It is not a complete picture of the journey as depicted in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, rather it is focused on the events I found most poignant and meaningful while still portraying the general structure of the book. My interpretations of the story are based my translation of the Latin text.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Ruebel for agreeing to be my advisor and for guiding my translation of Book VI. Without him my sentences would begin with "however" and Aeneas would never have made it out of the Underworld.

I would also like to thank Barbara Moll for inspiring many of the details of the quilt and for giving me the confidence to pursue this project.

As I am a Latin and Classical Cultures double major, it may seem rather obvious that I chose a work of classical literature to interpret as my thesis, but I had special reason to choose the *Aeneid*. Vergil has been one of my favorite authors since I began studying his *Aeneid* my junior year in high school. I have read several translations of the *Aeneid* in English and have translated a majority of it from the original Latin. The work has both frustrated and awed me with its metrical brilliance and complex narrative. Book VI is incredibly important to the work because it is the turning point in the epic when the hero Aeneas ceases to lament the past and begins to look forward to his future.

I chose to focus on the journey through the Underworld instead of the entire book because Aeneas must confront his past before he can accept his future. Before Book VI Aeneas struggled against his fate: he did not want to leave Troy and he does not want to found Italy. He has endured such that he is reluctant towards his future, but in the Underworld he must confront several faces of his past in reverse order. These confrontations allow him to come to terms with his past so he may be inspired to pursue his future. The geography of the Underworld itself is fascinating. I wanted to interpret it from my own perspective, but without thousands of words. I wanted to interpret the *Aeneid* with my hands, which led me to a quilt.

I chose to make a quilt because I wanted to challenge myself with something more than a paper. I had the general knowledge to make one, but I had never attempted to portray anything through fiber arts before. I was also interested in experimenting with mediums such as fabric paint and embroidery to add further details. Having made a few quilts before this, I knew that a quilt is an extension of oneself. Even the most basic patchwork quilt has seen the quilter's time, patience, and endurance. I had given those

things already to the *Aeneid*, thus I decided to integrate them into one project. A project that would make me see the *Aeneid* in a new light, that is visually to interpret it. I could grow as a quilter and as a Latin student.

My advisors were a great inspiration to my project. Dr. Ruebel and I met Fall Semester 2008 and translated Vergil's *Aeneid* so that I would have a thorough understanding of the text. I myself wanted to be able to found my interpretations in the text. Barbara Moll, an esteemed member of the Muncie community, agreed to serve as my quilting advisor and she was a great source of inspiration. It was a great help to hear such a distinguished quilter approve of my ideas. She gave me the confidence to actually take on the project. Ms. Moll also helped me come up with ways to interpret the text onto the blocks and helped to solidify some of the ideas I already had.

The final product is a quilt 43" x 55" that represents Aeneas's journey through the Underworld. The thirty-five squares were each further hand-decorated to add extra detail to the representation. The quilt consists of thirty-five blocks, which were pieced and quilted by machine. The supplemental decoration of embroidery, buttons, ribbon, cord, and paint was all done by hand. I chose black for the embroidery color of text for readability's sake. I created the block pattern used in the majority of the blocks myself, but the pattern used for the River Styx was found in Judy Hopkins' Once More Around the Block (61). Everything worked as I had planned except for the shores of the Styx. Originally, I had cut netting to look like reaching hands and then sewed those onto the quilt. I ended up not liking how they looked and decided to use fabric paint instead.

The focus of the work is on the images in the Underworld. Some attention was given to Aeneas's character development because he undergoes a major change in the

Elysian Fields, but my first priority was images. A quilt's story is told via visual media. The translations are my own.

I begin the story of the underworld at the top left-hand corner. It represents the golden bough and the beginning of Aeneas's journey to the underworld. The fabric's gold color represents the golden bough. The Cumaen Sibyl charges Aeneas with the task of finding the golden bough before she will be his guide. The embroidery on the square reads: *Nunc animis opus, Aenea, nunc pectore firmo*: "Now you will need courage, Aeneas, now a strong heart" (*Aen.* 6. 261). These are the last words the Sibyl says to Aeneas before they enter the Underworld.

The following blocks represent the entrance to the Underworld. They are black to illustrate the enveloping darkness of Orcus. Vergil describes, *Rebus nox abstulit atra colorem*: "Black night steals away color from things" (*Aen.* 6. 272). The embroidery indicates the nefarious figures clinging or skulking around the dark entrance: Sorrow, Fear, Pain, Hunger, and so on. I depicted them in shocking colors and chaotic shapes to capture the frightening, yet unfathomable, visages of these beings.

The dark green blocks represent the tree of false dreams, which Aeneas sees just after entering the Underworld. The fabric inspires the spreading branches of the tree and the buttons are for the false dreams hidden under each leaf. While Vergil does not enter into much detail about what the tree or the false dreams mean, for me it has always been a striking image.

The following blue blocks represent the shore of the river Styx evoke one of most haunting scenes in the *Aeneid*. The dead spirits of wives, husbands, warriors, and children mill about on the shore. These are the unburied dead who are doomed to wait

one hundred years before they may cross the river. *Tendebatque manus ripae ulterioris amore*: “And they reach their hands in desire of the farther shore” (*Aen.* 6. 314) is the line that is portrayed in the quilt.

This the first instance where Aeneas confronts his past. He meets Palinurus, his helmsman, who died at the end of Book V, wandering among the unburied souls on the beach. He represents the fateful journey across the Mediterranean. Just as Palinurus thought he was safe from drowning on land and was then killed, so were the Trojans continually driven away again from Italy’s shores. The reaching hands may also echo hands of the Trojans reaching toward Italy, continually out of their grasp. The Sibyl resolves this sorrow and desperation by assuring Palinurus that he would be buried and find peace and at the same time, implying that the Trojans would reach their shore and find peace also.

I decided on blue fabrics for the blocks not because of anything specific in the text, but because of the atmosphere of sadness and sorrow created by the spirits on the shore. The white handprints represent the ghostly hands of the shades reaching in vain across the Styx.

The river Styx is rendered with a quilt block pattern creating the look of stylized waves. The colors and patterns of the two fabrics are inspired by lines, *Turbidus caenogurgis/aestuat*: “The wild whirlpool boils in the mire” (*Aen.* 6. 296-97), and, *Glaucaque in ulua*: “In grey-green weeds” (*Aen.* 6. 416).

The next set of blocks represents the encounter between Dido and Aeneas in the Fields of Mourning. Dido, who died in Book IV, is the second person Aeneas confronts in the Underworld. She represented the city and the life that Aeneas wanted, but could

not have because it was located not in Italy, but Carthage. I chose purples and lilacs to be the colors of the blocks because I felt they portrayed the sorrow and regret of its inhabitants. The characters in the Fields of Mourning have been destroyed by love, *Quos durus amor crudelis tabe peredit*: “Whom harsh love destroyed with cruel sorrow” (*Aen.* 6. 442). Thus I imagine that their passion, an emotion associated with the color red, has faded by their regret and sadness, often represented with the color blue, resulting in purple as the color of the blocks.

The exchange begins in the lowest leftmost purple block and is read moving upwards and right ways. As the scene progresses, Dido separates herself physically and psychologically from Aeneas and the blocks suggest this as the quilt is read by moving the eye continually upwards. It is as though Aeneas and the viewer both begin and remain at the first block while Dido flees up the quilt to her deceased husband. The embroidery also indicates that Dido is running away. It begins, *Infelix Dido*: “Unlucky Dido,” which are the first words Aeneas speaks to her when they meet in the Fields of Mourning (*Aen.* 6. 456). Then as he is speaking to her Aeneas sees that she is not responding and says, *Quem fugis*: “Whom do you flee?” (*Aen.* 6. 466). The broken heart represents the end of their relationship, which has been doomed since Book I, as Dido rejects Aeneas for her first husband and Aeneas lets her go; “As an enemy she flees:” *Inimica refugit*, (*Aen.* 6. 472). In the final block Dido is the arms of her *Conjux pristinus*: “First husband” (*Aen.* 6. 473). Thus the resolution of this confrontation is Aeneas observing and accepting that Dido has solace in her first husband.

Aeneas has his third confrontation somewhere between the Fields of Mourning and Tartarus. There was not any imagery in this short episode to appropriate to a quilt

block, but it is important to Aeneas's development represented in the scarlet and gold blocks further down in the work. Here Aeneas meets the warriors killed in the Trojan War, which is described in Book II. He has until now regretted that he did not die a hero at Troy. Deiphobus absolves Aeneas of his guilt and regret in not falling in battle by saying, *I, melioribus utere fatis*: "Go, enjoy better fates" (*Aen.* 6. 546). Aeneas is now freed of the binding sorrow and guilt of his past.

Following the Fields of Mourning and the deceased warriors Aeneas and the Sibyl come across the gates of Tartarus. I chose many reds and oranges to suggest the images of blood (*cruenta*, *Aen.* 6. 555), and flames (*facem*, *Aen.* 6. 607). I also chose fabrics with stark colors and patterns to appear chaotic and violent to coincide with the violent punishments of the inhabitants of the region. The block pattern was inverted to convey the same idea. The lack of supplemental decoration was inspired by what the Sibyl tells Aeneas as they are about to leave,

*Non, mihi si linguae centum sint oraque centum  
ferrea vox, omnis scelerum comprehendere formas  
omnia poenarum percurrere nomina possim.*

"I would not be able, if I had a hundred tongues and a hundred mouths and an iron voice, to describe all the forms of wickedness or to run through all the names of the punishments" (*Aen.* 6. 625-627).

It was more powerful to represent Tartarus in general than to choose specific lines or images.

After the violence of Tartarus, Aeneas proceeds to the idyllic realm of Elysium. The lush green color is in accordance with the multiple references to the grass in the region. *Amoena virecta*: "Charming green places" (*Aen.* 6. 638), and *Odoratum lauris nemus*: "With a grove fragrant of laurel" (*Aen.* 6. 658) are two specific images of greenery that inspired me. The greens of the Elysian Fields are much more verdant than



the greens of the tree of false dreams because no sadness or terror is present to darken the area.

The next blocks portray the vision of Rome Anchises passes on to Aeneas in Elysium, which is the most important event in Book VI. Until this point Aeneas was stifled by his past. He would rather have died at Troy than endure his Odyssey across the Mediterranean, but by the time he arrives in Elysium he is absolved of past regrets, a *tabula rasa*. He is ready to accept his fate and found Italy.

Anchises inspires his son Aeneas by naming great Romans to come and predicting the glory of Rome, *Incluta Roma/imperium terris, animos aequabit Olympo*: “Famous Rome will equal the power of the earth and the will of Olympus” (*Aen.* 6. 781-82). Aeneas’s soul is now “burning with love of the coming fame:” *incenditque animum famae venientis amore* (*Aen.* 6. 889). Where before he lamented Italy and his fate, he now gladly accepts it.

The blocks are scarlet and gold to represent Anchises’s vision of the glory of Rome because they are the colors of the Empire. The embroidery consists of several names of actual Romans that Anchises invokes to inspire his son. Augustus Caesar is in its own block because Vergil dedicates about sixteen lines to “predicting” the reign of Augustus, who commissioned the work itself.

The last blocks represent the “Twin gates of sleep:” *Geminae Somni portae* (*Aen.* 6. 893). The tan fabric blocks are for the gate made of horn and the tan ribbon for the “true shades:” *veris umbris* (*Aen.* 6.894). Aeneas, however, is not a true shade and may not leave from the gate of horn. He exits through the last block, the gate of ivory. The silver cord is the exit of Aeneas as “false dreams to the light:” *falsa ad caelum insomnia*

(*Aen.* 6. 899). Vergil gives no more information about the meaning of the gates, but I found them necessary to include because of the intriguing images they create.

Thus Aeneas's journey through the Underworld is ended. Over the course of this project I have come to a much deeper understanding and appreciation of the *Aeneid*. I had known that Aeneas lived his life backwards in the Underworld, but I had never understood why. Now I see that it is crucial to both the development of his character and the plot of the story. I have also learned a lot concerning visual imagery. I gained insight and experience in depicting text-based images in fiber arts as well as finding a resonance in Vergil's images that I had not felt before. In addition my skills in quilting have increased in that I have learned to create a pattern myself, to add supplemental details to a quilt block, and to interpret visual images with fabric.

## Works Cited

Hopkins, J. (2003). *Once More Around the Block*. Washington: Martingale & Co.

Vergil. (1962). *Vergil's Aeneid*. (L. R. Lind, Trans.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Vergil. (1969). *P. Vergili Maronis Opera* (R. A. B. Mynors, Ed.). New York: Oxford Clarendon Press.

Vergil. (1971). *The Aeneid of Vergil*. (A. Mandelbaum, Trans.). New York: Bantam Books.

